

Dr Ian Holland
Secretary
Environment Communication Information Technology & the Arts
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Dr Holland

**Re: Inquiry into Australian Visual Arts and Crafts Sector
Specifically: Indigenous Art from remote communities**

My Background:

- Age: 56
- Fellow of the Institute of Chartered Accounts and Taxation Institute of Australia
- Gallery Director; Marshall Arts, Adelaide SA
- 33 years experience in Indigenous Art
- Promoter of Community Based Indigenous Art exclusively (representing over 17 communities)
- Married, 3 children, 3 grandchildren

Terms of Reference:

My approach is to choose not to specifically address the terms of reference as I do not wish to contribute to the sanitization and depersonalizing of a complex issue. I have also had the advantage of perusing other submissions and see no point in reiterating points raised; many of which have been repeated and reinforced by respondents. Instead, I feel obliged to offer an alternate perspective in relation to a broad range of issues.

1) High Profile Indigenous Artists (*It's not about money!*):

- With all the success, with all the money, with all the notoriety, I am not aware of any famous Indigenous artist who:
 - Enjoys the luxury of a 'weekender' in the form of an air-conditioned condominium overlooking the Alice Springs Golf Course, or has enrolled their children or grandchildren at Geelong Grammar.
- I am however, aware of famous, highly successful Indigenous artists who:
 - Live in abject poverty and are often hungry.
 - Are 'alone'; having lost their spouses, their children and most of their grandchildren.
 - Feel a sense of despair when they see sadness and a lack of hope in the eyes of a younger generation.
- If offered a choice, these artists would choose to 'live in country'. Success and notoriety in our society often translates to having the capacity to exercise personal choice. Jeffrey Smart is another Australian artist who has gained much well-earned notoriety; in contrast, he has chosen to reside in Tuscany.

2) The Market (We created it):

- It is a 'fickle mistress' and at the top end, will turn its back on perceptions of quality and value with little regard for personal circumstance of the artist or their family.
- It is easily persuaded; much in the same manner as voters leading toward an election. It responds to what it is told. It is largely uneducated and ill-informed.
- It is also primarily influenced by perceptions of value, quality, scarcity, capacity for financial growth and age of artists.
- It is easily manipulated; particularly by biased editorials, selective offerings at public auction, vested interests, obligations to clients, etc. etc., all contribute to a 'hotch potch' of subjective judgments; clouding issues such as integrity, provenance, critical analysis and comparative worth.

3) The Artists (*It's about 'Country'*):

- Are driven by need, the opportunity to teach, the opportunity for some level of financial independence, personal approval, engagement, family pressures, etc. etc. - much the same as anyone.
- Are often old, tired and frail, they are particularly vulnerable to excessive demands placed on them by family and 'outside forces'.
- Are often unable to understand the ramifications of commercial engagement on 'whitefella' terms. Many of the artists can neither read nor write.
- Most importantly; they paint, we collect. We think we own it, they know they have never lost it; after all, they are painting 'country'.

4) Integrity and Provenance (*It's about respect*):

- Artists know (instinctively) when they are respected. Their artwork reflects the value placed by them on the relationship with the person or institution for whom they are painting. They alone are responsible for 'quality control'. Quality is synonymous with shared respect; not money.
- Agent galleries, individuals and Art Centre Advisors accept work consistent with their judgment, perception and knowledge, usually based on contemporary, visual appeal. In a mutually respectful environment, masterpieces can be created.

5) Pricing and Margins (*It's about transparency*):

- Artists accept (generally) what they are offered in order to accommodate "today's needs" (I am unaware of any financial advisors 'doing the rounds' of remote communities).
- Art Centres walk 'a budget tight rope' in providing a fair return for artists, while preserving resources to accommodate 'the next generation'.
- Commercial galleries justify margins on perceptions of financial commitment, overheads and risk associated with a lack of representative tenure.
- Dealers justify margins on their own perceptions of risk, largely influenced by whether or not they are first or last in 'the transaction cycle'.
- Unlike their Australian contemporaries, most Aboriginal artists neither set their own price nor control margins. To this extent, they are the primary source of supply, yet powerless in the money stakes.

6) Choosing where to live (It's about rights):

- Aboriginal artists have little or no control over their physical destination.
- Indigenous artists produce their best work; work which resonates with soul and cultural integrity, when it is painted 'in country'. Relocation means dispossession; our artistic and cultural gift to the world will be diluted, polluted and prejudiced if we do not recognize the importance of country in context with family and ancestral roots.

7) Arts Advisors (It's about dedication and compassion):

- There is no model that offers an accurate job description for what is really expected from Arts Advisors.
- As a collective they represent some of the most dedicated, compassionate professional people I have ever met.
- They are under-resourced, undervalued and vulnerable. They too, have little or no security of tenure and are often expected to work in conditions which are foreign and excessively demanding.
- They are the cultural arborists; they are the paternal/maternal figures protecting the sick, elderly and the frail, in essence, they are pseudo custodians of people who represent the 'cultural seed pods' of the future.

For the sake of brevity, I wish to offer the following suggestions, not merely as a 'wish list' but as a list of 'must do's' if we are to address some of the negatives which impact on our Indigenous Art Industry:

- 1) The opportunity for artists and their families to live in close proximity to 'country' must be seen as a right and not as a privilege.
- 2) Art Centres must receive additional funding for the purpose of promoting and preserving culture. They must also receive greater support in order to service peripheral needs of artists and their families.
- 3) A licensing system must be introduced inviting applications from persons interested in becoming approved (licensed) retailers of Indigenous Art.
- 4) A system of compliance and financial transparency must be introduced in support of all wholesale and retail sales of items in excess of \$1,000. This 'cost trail' must be made available on request to end buyers.
- 5) Alternative employment opportunities must be explored for Indigenous artists whose work will not succeed in the market place.
- 6) Opportunities for corporate inclusion in broader community activities must be examined.
- 7) Opportunities for metropolitan school cross cultural relationships must be examined.
- 8) Capacity for communities to retain and protect works of cultural significance must be examined.
- 9) Opportunities for 'successful' artists to be provided with ongoing financial support for themselves and their families must be examined.
- 10) Capacity for State public institutions to acquire and display work must be improved.

Many other important issues have previously been raised and I therefore see no need to repeat them.

Conclusion:

I have been 'here' 56 years. 'We' have been here 240 years. 'They' have been here for over 40,000 years and 'they' are now threatened with cultural extinction. We have a duty, indeed an obligation, to ensure their voices on canvas continue to 'sing' in celebration of our rich Indigenous culture. In the absence of song, what will remain is silence; the silence of ignorance, the silence of greed, a deafening silence echoing from a barren national soul.

Regards

Graeme Marshall

MARSHALL ARTS

24th November 2006